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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the impact of educational change on teachers' work in two Australian state education systems. The study was conducted in 1994 with a sample of 89 teachers and 87 school principals working in state schools in South Australia and Tasmania. Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview schedule and "teacher" and "principal" versions of a questionnaire. Teacher respondents identified 79 different changes in education which had significantly affected their work over the previous 5 years. The changes related to four major areas: students learning, teachers classroom teaching, the work of teachers as members of their school staff, and the work of teachers as employees of a statewide education system. Generally teachers on whom the "systemic" changes had the greatest impact reported more negative feelings about that particular change, about education changes in general, and about possible future educational changes than did teachers who felt more affected by changes from the other three areas. Teachers felt that the majority of changes originated in the central offices of their state system and that the changes served the interests of systems management. Only one-third of the teachers believed that the main purpose of the cited change was to improve teachers' teaching or students' learning. Lack of time was reported as the main impediment to effective implementation of change; teachers felt that the change had added to their workload and increased the pressures associated with their work. When the views of school principals were sought, there was strong congruence between the self-reports of teachers and the reports of principals as key observers of teachers work. (Author/ND)

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"TOO MUCH PUSHED BY PEOPLE WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND":

THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE ON AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS' WORKING LIVES

by

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Abstract

This paper reports and describes the impact of educational change on teachers' work in two Australian state education systems. The study was conducted in the latter half of 1994 with a sample of 89 teachers and 87 school principals currently working in state schools in South Australia and Tasmania. Data was gathered through a semi-structured interview schedule and "teacher" and "principal" versions of a questionnaire. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data was gathered, but only the quantitative data are reported in this paper.

Teachers respondents collectively identified 79 different changes in education which had significantly affected their work over the past five years. These changes were classified into four domains: first, changes related to students' learning; second, changes relating to teachers' classroom teaching; third, changes relating to the work of teachers as members of their school staff; and fourth, changes which related to the work of teachers as employees of a statewide education system.

Generally, teachers on whom the "systemic" changes had the greatest impact reported more negative feelings about that particular change, about educational changes in general and about possible future educational changes than did their fellow teachers who felt more affected by changes from the other three domains.

Teachers felt that the majority of changes originated in the central offices of their state system and that the changes served the interests of system management. Only one third of teachers believed that the main purpose of the cited change was to improve teachers' teaching or students' learning. Lack of time was reported as the main impediment to effective implementation of change, while teachers felt that the change had added to their workload and increased the pressures associated with their work.

When the views of school principals were sought, there was strong congruence between the self-reports of teachers and the reports of principals as key observers of teachers' work.

Aims

The study was conducted within the framework of a 16-country investigation by members of the Consortium for Cross Cultural Research in Education which collaboratively examined *the impact of educational change on teachers' work and their consequent disposition toward future change.* Within this context, however, this single study had five aims:

- to identify those educational changes which teachers see as having the most significant effects on their working lives;
- to discover the ways in which teachers' work lives have been affected by these changes;
- to examine teachers' predicted responses to future educational changes;
- to determine the extent to which teachers are satisfied with the quality of their working lives; and
- to extract implications for teachers, principals, teacher employers and teacher educators.

Methodology

In an initial stage, data gathering approaches were developed through teacher workshops, pilot studies and expert panel review. Arrangements were then made to collect data from teachers and principals from 87 schools. Collectively, these schools and respondents were representative of the major school types and of the demographic features of the teacher populations in both South Australia and Tasmania.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used with 37 teachers. Two versions of a detailed questionnaire were used, with 89 teachers and 87 principals respectively. The interviews were intended to gather the data teachers would divulge in a face-to-face setting; the teacher questionnaires were intended to gather the data that teachers would divulge when anonymity was assured; while the principal questionnaires were intended to gather the perceptions of key observers of teachers at work.

Participation of teachers and principals was sought by an initial mail-out to 155 schools, resulting in a participation rate of 56.1%.

Educational changes having the most impact on teachers' work lives

Changes were classified into four major domains of teachers' work, as follows:

Changes which affect:

STUDENTS' LEARNING
(eg. new subjects/curricula)

TEACHERS' TEACHING
(eg. criterion-based assessment)

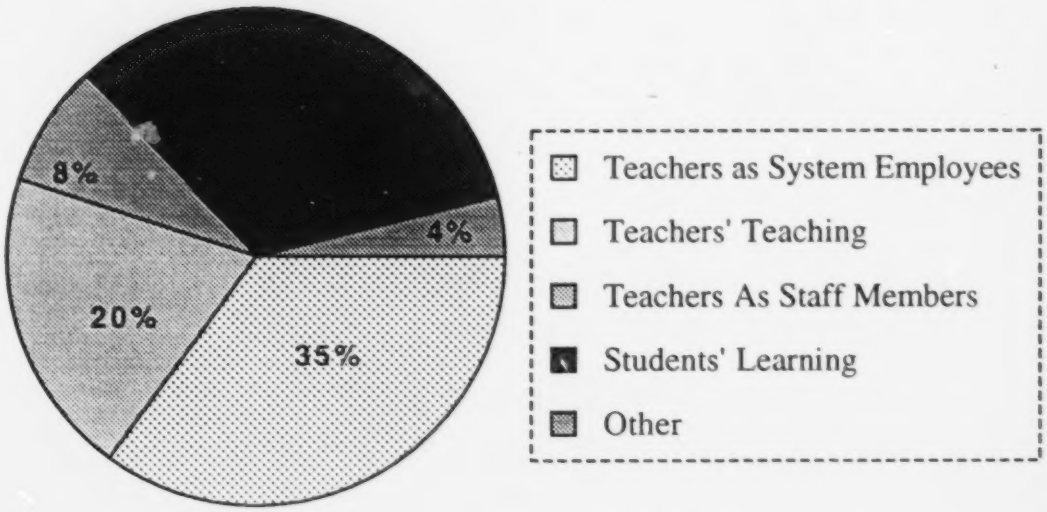
TEACHERS AS STAFF MEMBERS
(eg. devolution of school management)

TEACHERS AS SYSTEM EMPLOYEES
(eg. government cuts to education)

and

OTHER changes
(eg. professional development expectations)

Figure 1



DISCUSSION

These data were gathered by both interview (n = 37) and teacher questionnaire (n = 89) in two stages.

Teachers were first asked to "Identify the educational changes which have had a significant impact" on their working lives in the past five years. A total of 515 citations resulted, involving 79 different educational changes. Of these 79 changes, 33 were cited by only one respondent. The most commonly identified changes were:

- the introduction of national curriculum statements;
- the results of cuts to government funding of education;
- increased accountability requirements;
- changing behaviour management expectations;
- the introduction of new assessment and reporting procedures; and
- the inclusions of students with disabilities in the regular class.

Teachers were then asked to nominate the one change which had had the greatest degree of impact on their working lives. These changes were subsequently classified into four groups, according to which "domain" of a teacher's work upon which the change seemed to have the most impact. The results of this classification process are shown in Figure 1 on the previous page.

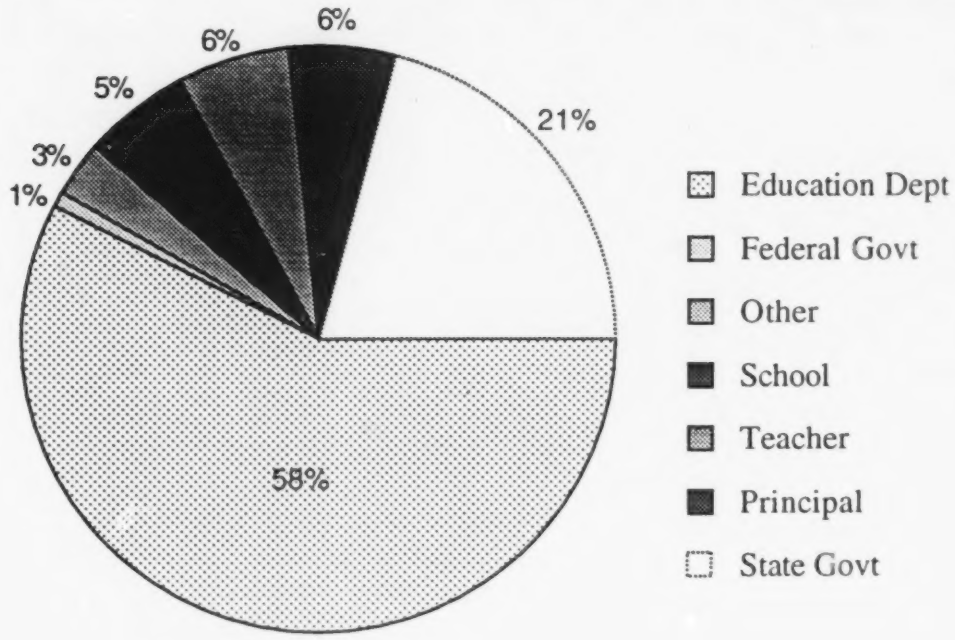
While it is true, of course, that many of the cited changes affected more than one domain of a teacher's work, this classification system was later to prove useful in analysing teachers' responses to current and future educational changes. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that government cuts to education (classified in the "system employees" domain) can and do have impacts on students' learning, teachers' teaching and on whole-school staffs, while the introduction of new curricula (classified in the "students' learning" domain) has profound impact on teachers' teaching and on the other domains as well to some extent.

It is clear from the data, however, that these teachers see changes which impact primarily on the "system employee" and "students' learning" domains as having had the most significant effects on their working lives in the period 1990-1994.

Characteristics of the most significant changes

ORIGIN

Figure 2



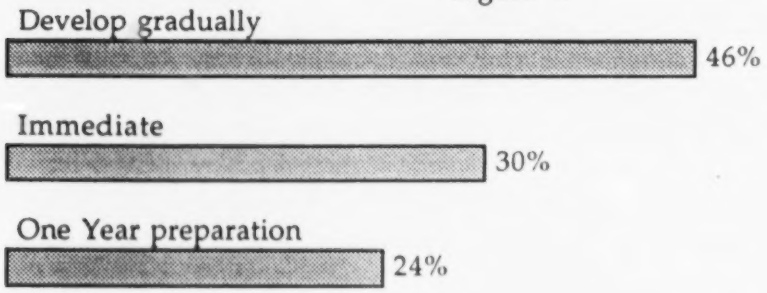
MAIN OBJECTIVE

Figure 3

Reduce costs	29%
Improve students' learning	23%
Improve system management	21%
Improve teaching quality	13%
Achieve social policy	14%

IMPLEMENTATION TIME

Figure 4



DISCUSSION

1. The origin of the change

This data was obtained than an interview question which asked from where the change came and from a multiple choice questionnaire item which listed 8 possible "origins of the change". Most startling is the finding, even in these days of so much decision-making being devolved to the local level, that not one respondent saw the change originating in "the local community", with similarly low scores for "school", "teacher" and "principal" as sources of the origin of the change. Overwhelmingly, therefore, change for teachers comes from "out there" and they seemingly feel little opportunity to instigate the sort of change which would have significant impact on their working lives.

2. The main objective of the change

Even the main objective of educational change is seen as external to what happens in classrooms in the majority of cases. Given the "practicality ethic in teacher decision-making" which tells us that teachers adapt, rather than adopt, innovations, and only then when they see some practical value for themselves or their students, the results displayed in Figure 3 on the previous page might well explain the apparent reluctance of some teachers to embrace warmly a variety of centrally-instigated change initiatives.

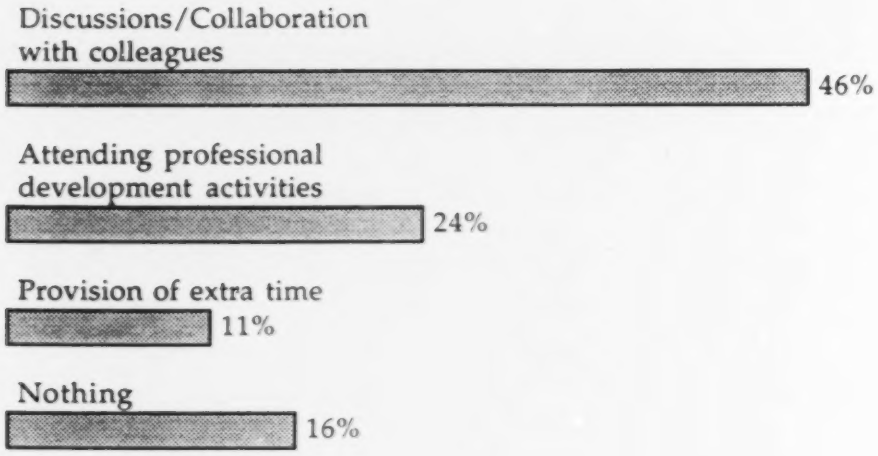
3. The implementation time-frame

This data was gathered from interviewees only, with the question, "Was the change announced as ready for immediate full implementation, or was it introduced more gradually and allowed to develop over time?" In this data, the different perspectives on time held by teachers and educational administrators is demonstrated. Particularly with major curriculum changes administrators often allowed a period of one year for teachers to prepare for the innovation. This amount of time, presumably seen as adequate by the administrators for whom this single initiative was the focus of their work, was universally regarded by teachers as woefully inadequate, as they had to cope with all of their current tasks in the existing structure while simultaneously preparing to introduce new ways of operating.

Factors which assisted and factors which hindered implementation.

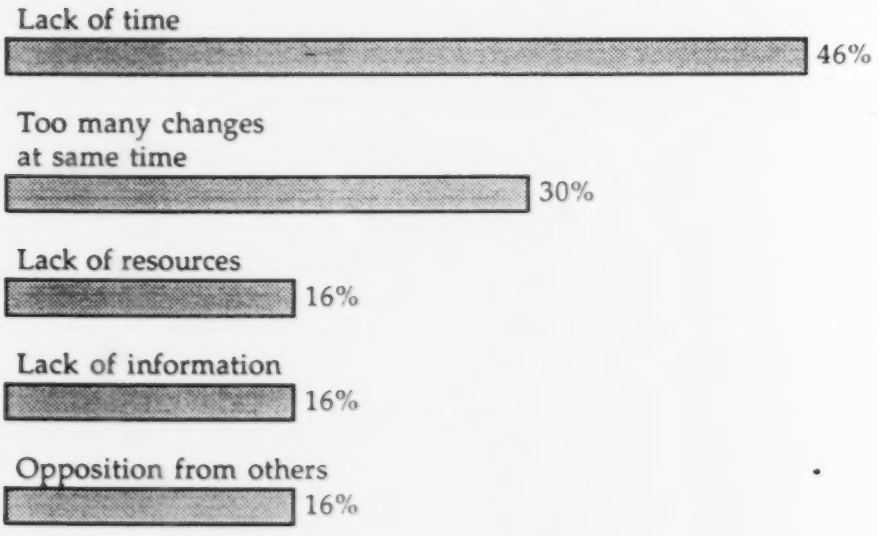
FACTORS ASSISTING IMPLEMENTATION

Figure 5



FACTORS HINDERING IMPLEMENTATION

Figure 6



DISCUSSION

The data presented in Figure 5 and Figure 6 on the previous page were gathered from the 37 in-depth semi-structured interviews. These were conducted by three interviewers, none of whom were current practising teachers but each of whom had undergone the same training session in the interview techniques required for the purposes of this study.

The questions relevant to this data were, "What things, whether by their presence or their absence, helped you in your efforts to implement this change?" and, "Now what about the other side of the coin? What things hindered your efforts to implement this change?"

The results are further evidence for the veracity of the large body of literature which describes the conditions necessary for effective implementation of educational innovations.

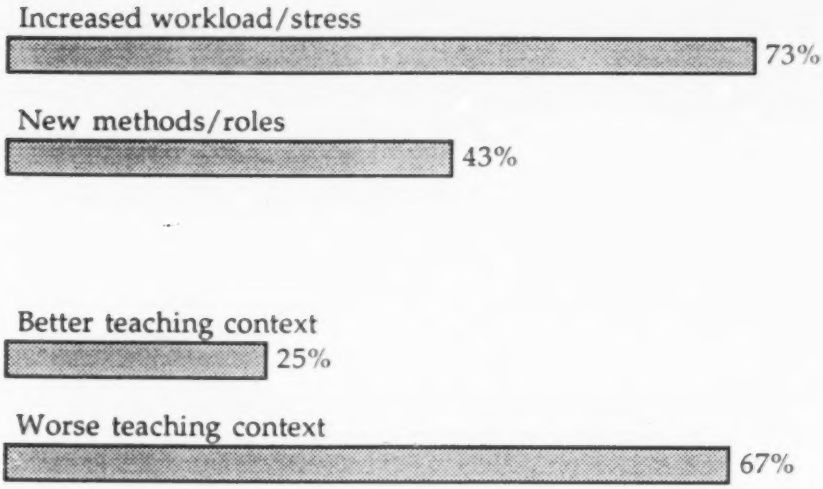
The claims of the literature are virtually mirrored in this data. The literature says "teachers need to make their own sense and meaning of the innovation": this data shows the importance of teachers' informal discussions with their colleagues in this regard. The literature says that effective change implementation processes are characterised by ensuring that time, information and other resources are available to those who are charged with putting the innovation into practice: this data shows that while some extra time was provided, the amount of time provided and the availability of other supporting resources was clearly regarded as inadequate.

While only 30% of respondents cited the existence of "too many changes all at the same time" as an impediment to implementation, this theme was often raised by teachers at various stages throughout the interviews. Indeed, it was common for people to reply, "Oh God, there've been so many!", in answer to the first question asking teachers to identify those educational changes which had affected their working lives in the past five years. This is further evidence of the problems inherent in a system in which innovations are directed by those who have that one project as the focus of all their work and who fail to understand the number and complexity of the competing demands placed on the teachers who are charged with implementation.

How the change affected teachers in their work.

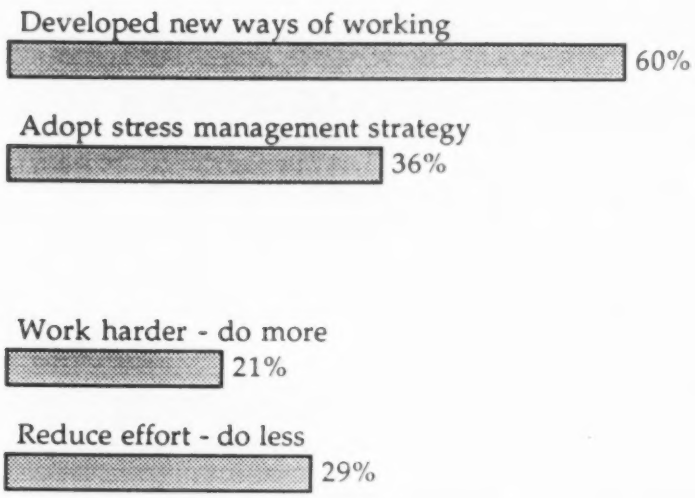
TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTS

Figure 7



TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO THESE EFFECTS

Figure 8



DISCUSSION

1. How teachers' work has been affected

The data presented in Figure 7 on the previous page were gathered from both interview and questionnaire sources. In summary, three teachers in every four reported that their involvement with educational change had resulted in significant increases in the demands placed on them in their work. Similarly, nearly half reported that the change had required them to adopt new methods of work or to take on new and additional roles at work. Typically, these new roles were informal rather than official, and included a tendency for teachers to be expected to take up new roles and responsibilities, such as "counsellor" and "social worker", in the wake of reductions in education funding and changing social circumstances.

Only one quarter of respondents felt that the relevant changed had brought any improvement to their work context, while two-thirds of teachers felt that the opposite was the case and that their work situation had been made worse as a result of the change. In this regard, many teachers reported that their involvement in the change had left them with, "less time to spend on real teaching."

2. How teachers have responded to new conditions at work

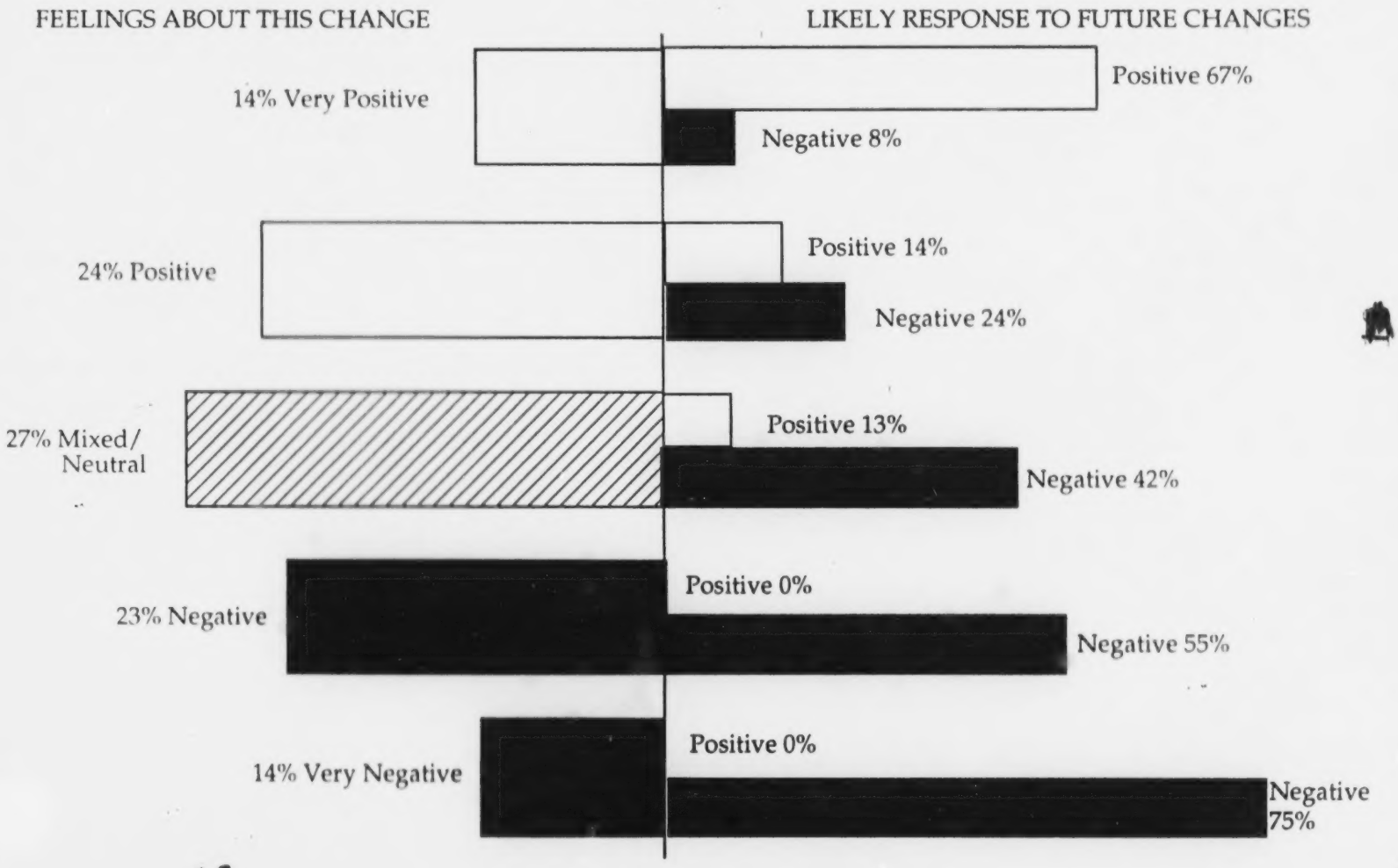
The data presented in Figure 8 were gathered from a questionnaire item which asked teachers to list the strategies they had adopted in order to adjust to new work patterns which had resulted from the change. The 89 respondents collectively cited 90 different strategies, with the most common being, "share work with colleagues more often."

The new ways of working adopted by teachers were typified by both "shallow coping" and "deep coping" strategies.

It should be of concern to all involved in the promotion of educational change that the number of teachers who claimed to have resorted to reducing their effort at work as a response to the change outweighed those who claimed to have increased the amount of time and effort they put into into their work. There is some indication here that, regardless of the best of motives, many current change initiatives may be counter-productive.

Teachers' feelings about this change and future educational changes.

Figure 12



DISCUSSION

The data presented in fig. 9 on the previous page were obtained from both interview and questionnaire respondents.

1. Feelings about the current change

Teachers were divided equally in relation to their current feelings about the recent change which they cited as having had the most significant impact on their working life. The data presented here represent teachers' feelings after some considerable period of "living with the change". In this regard, it was apparent in the interviews that many teachers had, to some extent at least, come to terms with a change about which they had previously felt much more negative or ambivalent. Commonly, however, this was a grudging admission that experience of the change "hadn't been as bad as expected", rather than overt enjoyment of conditions or contexts produced by the change.

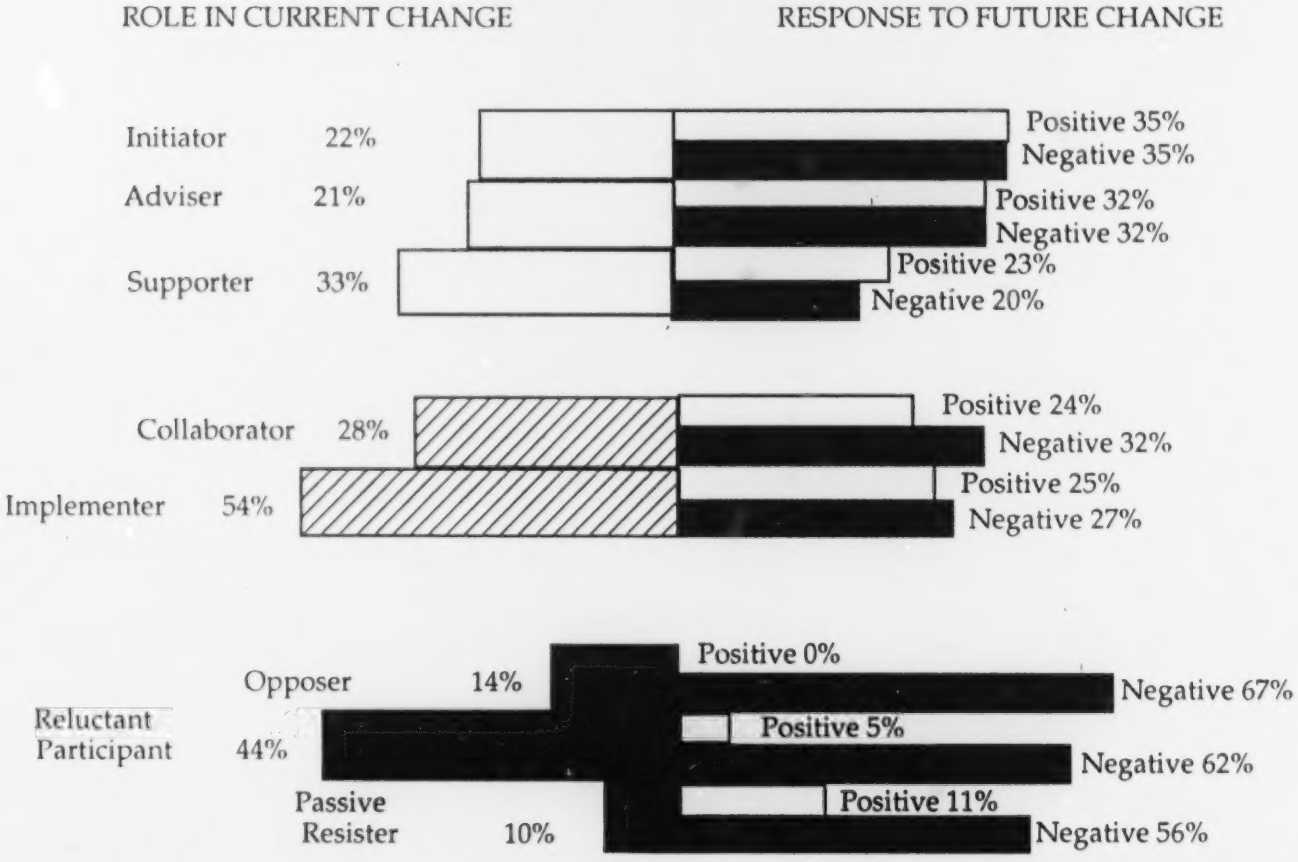
2. Resultant likely initial response to future change

The data presented in Figure 9 omit those respondents who were "undecided" in their likely initial attitude toward future change and those who claimed that their involvement with the current change had not affected their likely attitude. Hence the data presented here are more properly interpreted as indicating the proportions of teachers who would be "more positive" or "more negative" in their response to future change as a direct result of their involvement with the current change.

Two trends are clear in the data: first, that only in cases where the current experience of change has been "very positive" do teachers expect to look more positively at future changes; and second, that mildly positive, mixed or any level of negative current experience of change translates into clearly negative expectations of future changes. On a note of caution, many teachers, especially those interviewed, began their response with the rider, "Well, it depends on the change", adding weight to the well-established "practicality ethic" in teacher decision-making. Nevertheless, experience of change, unless very positive in nature, does not appear to be sufficient to reduce levels of uncertainty and anxiety with which teachers regard unfamiliar change initiatives.

Teachers' roles in the current change and attitudes toward future changes.

Figure 10



DISCUSSION

The data displayed in Figure 10 on the previous page examine the significance that teachers' self-perceived roles in current change processes may have in relation to how they expect to initially respond to future change initiatives. These data were obtained by linking teachers' responses to the questionnaire item, "Which of the following terms best describes your role ... " with the same teachers' replies to the item which examined how experience with the current change had affected teachers' likely initial response to future educational changes. Those teachers whose likely attitude to future change was unchanged or who were undecided are not included in Figure 10, thus accounting for the pairs of percentages in the "Likely Response" column not totalling 100%.

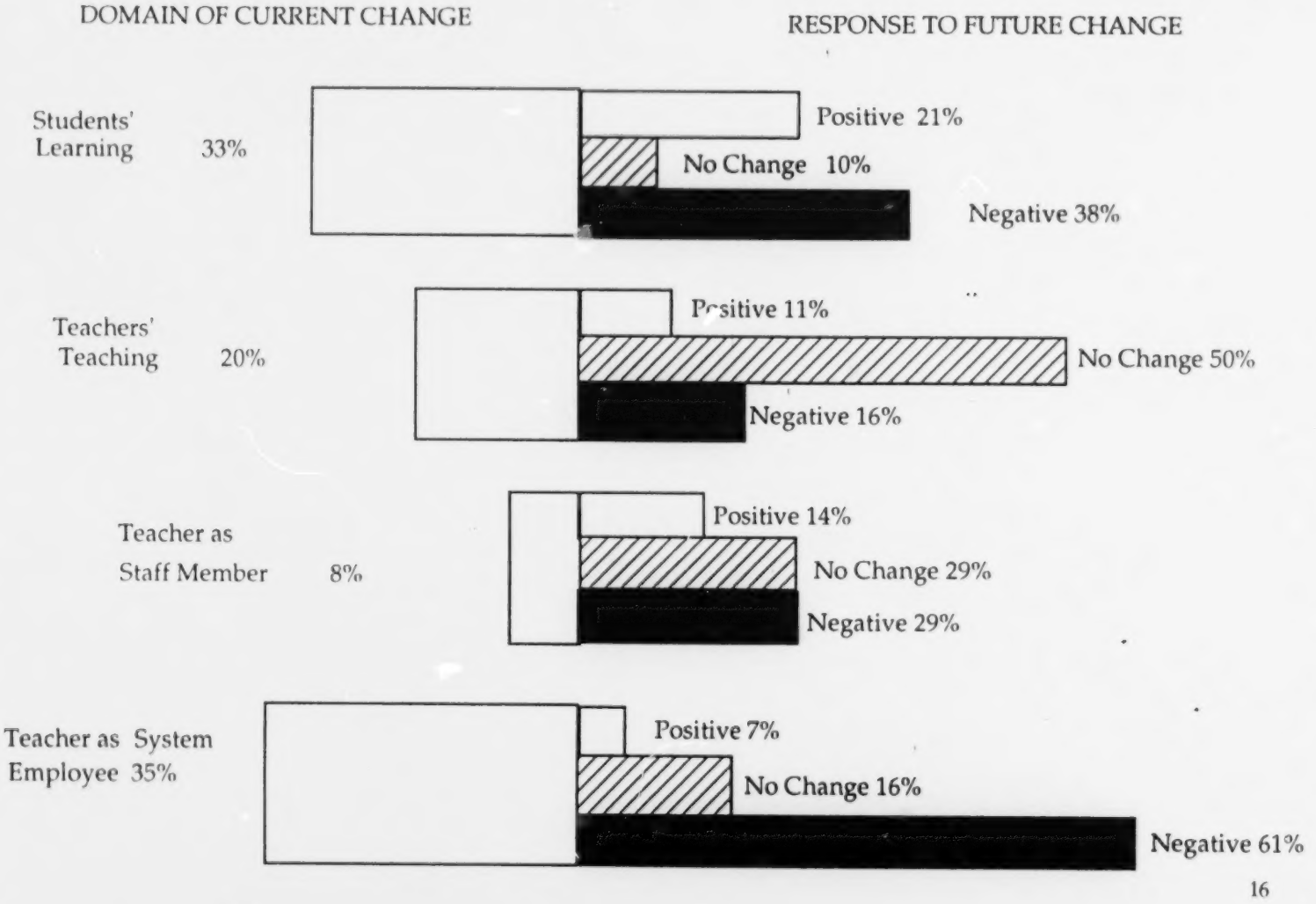
The trends in these data are quite clear; in summary:

- teachers who described themselves as being overtly opposedto the current change, consistently claimed that they would regard future educational changes "more negatively" than would have been the case in the absence of their experience of the current change;
- teachers who described themselves as being in "neutral" (albeit, active) roles in the current change, indicated a very slight tendency to approach future change more negatively, although half of this group replied that they were "undecided" or that their current experience had made no difference to their likely initial response; and
- teachers who described themselves as being in roles in which they actively supported the current change were almost equally divided in how their current experience had affected their likely initial response to future educational change.

The data cannot be interpreted to mean, "the nature of teachers' experiences with the current change will determine their likely response to future educational changes". More appropriate interpretations are: first, that negative experiences with a current change serve to reinforce the reluctance with which many teachers regard future change; and second, that even positive experiences with a current change only partially ameliorate a predisposition to regard future change with suspicion.

The domain in which teachers experience the current change and their response to future educational changes.

Figure 11



DISCUSSION

The data presented in Figure 11 on the previous page were collected using both interview and questionnaire instruments. Under examination here is the extent to which the "work domain", in which a teacher is most affected by a current change, is associated with their resultant likely response to future educational change. While those responses in which some teachers claimed that their experiences with the current change had made "no change" to their likely response to future change are displayed in Figure 11, the "undecided" figures are omitted, again explaining why the data in the "Likely Response" column do not tally 100%.

The single finding clearly apparent in the data is that teachers who have been most affected by change which affects them in the "system employee" domain indicate that their experiences will be likely to result in them responding more negatively toward future educational change, whatever the nature of such change. The keys to understanding the reasons behind this result might be found in the qualitative data gathered in the interviews and in the sections of the questionnaire which allowed and encouraged teachers to elaborate on and explain their responses. In these contexts teachers made comments including:

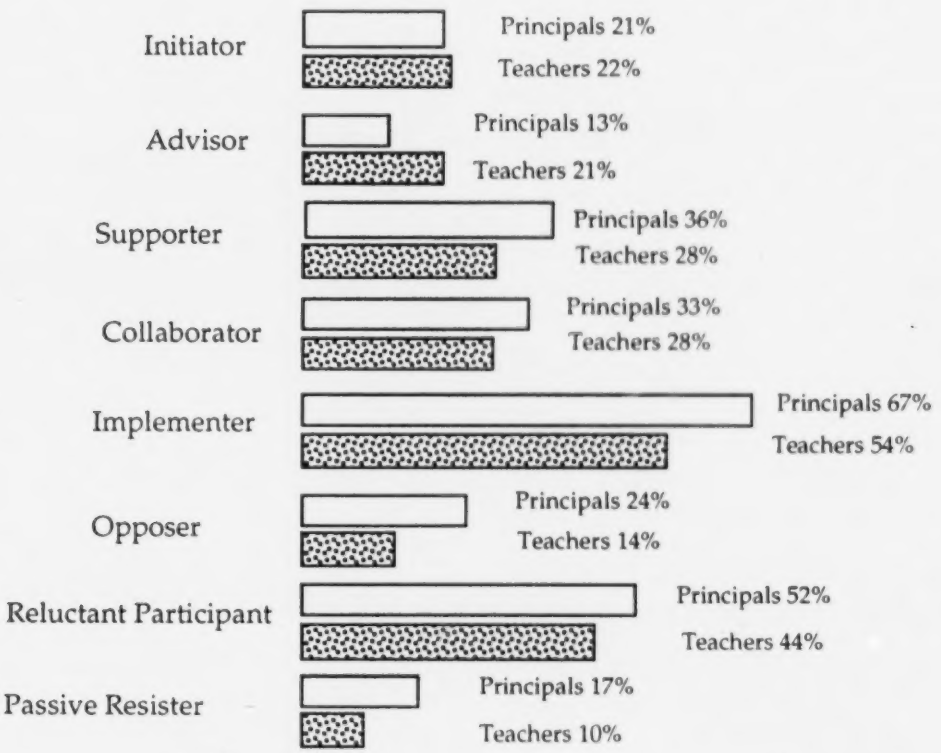
- "I feel like a pawn";
- "We are just numbers to them";
- "Any connection between department policy and classroom reality is purely accidental"; and
- "They have not been in classrooms recently and do not understand the frustrations, bad behavior and interruptions. Things can look good on paper! Are we the pack horses for others to step over on their ways into higher positions?".

The common theme running through these and similar comments was to the effect that teachers resented the changes imposed by seemingly distant educational authorities and justified their resentment by reference to a perceived lack of connection between the change and teaching and learning in classrooms. Thus, "systemic" changes dealing with management issues are said to be regarded by teachers with cynicism, rather than with any enthusiasm.

Comparing the perceptions of teachers and principals

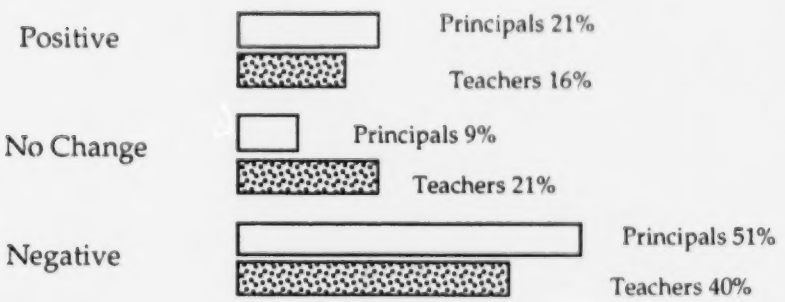
PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS' ROLES

Figure 12



TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TO FUTURE CHANGES

Figure 13



DISCUSSION

1. Perceptions of teachers' roles in change

The data in Figure 12 on the previous page are a compilation of the roles ascribed to teachers by themselves and by principals on their respective versions of the questionnaire.

Interpretation of these data results in the following findings:

- Teachers are, if anything, slightly more likely than principals to describe the parts teachers have played in the change process in terms of the "supportive" roles of "initiator", "adviser" or "supporter". However, the degree of difference in role ascription is so marginal as to be better regarded as non-existent.
- Principals are somewhat more likely than teachers to see teachers playing the "active neutral" roles of "collaborator" and "implementer" in the change process; and
- Principals are more ready than teachers to cast teachers in the "opposing" roles of "passive resister", "reluctant participant", and "opposer".

Overall, principals see teachers occupying slightly more negative roles than teachers perceive themselves to play. While the degree of difference is not great, what difference there is might be explained by teachers being prepared to express their misgivings about educational change in forums where the principal is present, as much as by any overt opposition which may have impeded principals' efforts to implement state department of education change initiatives.

2. Views of teachers' likely responses to future change

The data in Figure 13 on the previous page are a compilation of teachers' and principals' replies, on their respective versions of the questionnaire, to the item asking about teachers' likely response to future educational change.

Principals perceptions of teachers' views accord quite closely with teachers' self-reported views, indicating nothing more than principals are apparently perceptive observers of how educational change has affected their teachers' work lives.

Conclusions

- Two sorts of changes affect teachers most strongly - large-scale, system-wide initiatives, and changes that have direct impact on students' learning.

- Change initiatives are seen as emanating from the administrative centre of the education system and, to a lesser extent, directly from state government sources.

- The great majority of changes are not perceived by teachers as intended to improve the quality of teachers' teaching or students' learning.

- Lack of time, resources and information, together with a feeling that there were too many changes to be internalised at once, collectively hindered effective implementation.

- Teachers depended on informal discussions with their peers to assist in their change implementation efforts.

- Teachers felt that change increased their workloads and reduced the quality of their working lives.

- Teachers saw themselves playing a range of supporting, passive and opposing roles in the current change process. Those who described their current roles in negative or opposing terms displayed even more negative attitudes toward future change.

- Teachers who currently felt most affected by a system-wide management change were more negatively disposed toward future changes in education than were those teachers for whom change was currently impacting most strongly at the school or class level.

- Principals were cogent detectors of teachers' perceptions. However, while principals accurately predicted all trends in teachers' perceptions, they consistently cast teachers in more negative attitudes and roles than the teachers ascribed to themselves.

Implications

1. For teachers

Teachers need to accept the inevitability of change and to understand that change involves a degree of conflict, dissonance and uncertainty. They need to establish priorities and timetables for change at each of the individual, colleague-group and school levels. At each of these levels, teachers must be empowered to apply their professional judgement to the task of identifying those proposed changes which they are not (yet) able to implement effectively. While this should not be construed as a blank cheque to resist all innovations, teachers will otherwise be unable or unwilling to do anything more than merely comply on paper with the next wave of change initiatives.

2. For principals

Principals will need to act as filters between the ministrations of the State Departments of Education and their schools' teaching staffs. Negotiating and implementing change according to school-based priorities with adequate school or district-level support is indicated. Similarly, the timetable for change implementation needs to reflect the realities of teachers' work and local community contexts. This should be the case even when the innovation emanates from the realm of the central authority.

3. For teacher employers

Teachers and central educational administrators do not share a common perspective of time - both of time in general, and of appropriate dissemination and implementation time in particular. Implementation strategies need to become more genuinely collaborative and be more realistically resourced, or a continuing overload of change expectations is likely to result in burgeoning numbers of "teacher stress" cases.

4. For teacher educators

Given the pace and number of changes with which teachers are faced, pre-service teacher preparation and in-service teacher professional development should include significant components of training in implementation, in collaboration and in the other skills of the change agent.